

**A critical shortage of human resources for rural development**  
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*Context, Approaches & Results*

A minimum level of technical assistance, socio-organizational support and monitoring at the local level is necessary at the start of any rural development initiative. The presence of field personnel is thus crucial for supporting a range of corresponding activities. Given the limited educational level of the rural population and even some local authorities, the assistance of a field agent is primordial and this person is often the leader for local development actions initially. Trained technicians and extension agents exist in Madagascar, but those that are captivated by, or have a passion for rural development work far from cities or towns are extremely rare. Many field agents seem to accept work in order to meet family obligations. Due, however, to the difficult living conditions and poor educational opportunities for children, the vast majority do not bring their families to site with them. These facts, coupled with the incertitude of project work (4 to 5 years maximum) compel many agents to conduct a continuous job search; many leave abruptly as soon as another post is found, after a short and unsatisfactory stint. In short, there is often little to no professional attachment to rural development work. To complicate matters, the few high-quality field agents that a project can find constitute an uncommon asset, attracting the interest of other development actors who sometimes recruit and hire these agents, robbing the original project of staff in which it had invested significant resources. The end result is often a nearly endless cycle of field agent turnover and recruitment.

The problem of finding and retaining first-rate field agents is accentuated when projects, such as ERI, attempt to work in remote areas, next to some of Madagascar's last remaining natural forest. In order to reach some of these sites, two days of hiking on difficult trails is required. Many of these areas have not benefited from a sustained, rural development project for 20 to 25 years. The difficulty of this situation is compounded by the fact that projects such as ERI are the only rural development actor present: sectors not covered by ERI, such as the all-important infrastructure sector, remain a major handicap for any and all sustainable development initiatives.

Hiring a field agent that comes from a given rural intervention zone is a potential solution: in theory, local agents would have the passion and the resolve to develop their native area. One approach that attempts to implement this scenario is the farmer-to-farmer model. Farmer technicians (*paysans animateurs* or *paysans vulgarisateurs* [PA or PV]) are trained and carry out agricultural extension work. In the same vein, the Farmer Field School (FFS) approach is pragmatic, does not require a high-level of formal education and obviates the need for a large number of external field agents. Moreover, contact between "locals" facilitates exchange and interaction and may be superior to communication between an external agent and the local population.

Results of these approaches are largely positive: many farmer technicians are now operational as well as a considerable number of field schools in ERI intervention zones. The PAs and PVs provide technical support at the household level and a positive impact, via increasing yields and diversifying crops and practices, is emerging. In many cases, the impact goes beyond the *Koloharena* movement (to which the PAs and PVs are attached), as private individuals are beginning to call upon and pay for their expertise. The farmer-to-farmer model has also gone further than technical support, generating results via communication and extension on natural resource management. Overall, the approach is promising and seems able to provide the foundation for a more sustainable rural development extension system.

### Analysis

Based on the ERI experience, we offer some observations and suggestions with regard to improving the situation described above. First of all, we would like to stress again the importance of field agents or farmer technicians. In many ways, field agents can play the role of a program's eyes and ears in rural areas. Experience has shown that rural development support must reach the field and needs to be grounded in practical reality. Field agents can help projects avoid the tendency of concocting theoretical solutions and training sessions without visiting and seeing the challenges in the field. There is also a nugget of truth in the saying, that an organization is only as strong as its weakest link. Consequently, the results of rural development initiatives, projects and programs will reflect the strength of their field presence. If their field agents are unmotivated and uncommitted, impacts will tend to be mediocre.

In order to buttress field results and impacts, projects should probably spend more time on offering a solid, introductory, multi-disciplinary training for field agents. Ideally, the agents should already be multi-disciplinary, but this is usually not the case. For rural development work, however, a technical specialty such as agronomy or forestry is not as important as rural, socio-organizational experience. Strong planning and self-organization skills constitute additional vital elements for a strong field agent performance. It is also critical to monitor field agents closely via frequent field visits, especially during the early stages of their employment.

The importance of multi-directional and continuous communication at all levels cannot be over-emphasized with respect to enhancing field agent results. This includes communication between farmers or villages and farmer technicians (PAs and PVs), communication between the PAs and PVs and supervisory field agents and between field agents and their supervisors at project headquarters. Without timely communication among these various levels, interventions and results will be limited in scope, especially in difficult access areas.

Any rural development initiative, project or program should initially carry out a spatial analysis regarding field agent or farmer technician needs. It has been suggested that the optimal number of associations that a field agent can support is 8 to 10. Similarly, it has been suggested that a field agent cannot be effective if his or her intervention zone includes more than 6 *Fokontany*. These numbers are perhaps conservative and can be revised upwards, especially if the field agent manages or supervises a network of farmer technicians. Unfortunately this spatial aspect is frequently overlooked and needs are consequently under-estimated. The result is that some projects find themselves obligated to operate in a huge area with a field personnel budget that is inadequate at best.

Besides the farmer-to-farmer or farmer technician approach, we recommend pursuing the following solutions. Projects and programs should endeavor to increase rewards and benefits for field agents: pay scales should be raised and incentives put in place. It is also important to ensure that the benefits and materials are fairly homogenous among the cadre of agents; large salary

discrepancies should be avoided. Innovative work schedules should be considered for difficult access areas. One option would be to adopt an “oil rig” approach: 3 weeks of continuous work, including weekends, followed by a sort of “shore leave” for 1 week in the nearest big town.

Other paths to follow would include a phased approach whereby external field agents are employed for 2 or 3 years, gradually withdrawing and transferring skills to farmer technicians. In fact skills transfer is an extremely important aspect of rural development and should be a focus of field agents from the start of their work; ideally, this task should be highlighted in their scopes of work. If this transfer is done properly during 2 or 3 years, sustainability of the rural development initiative should be ensured.

Efforts to attract other donors, projects or private sector initiatives to difficult access areas, in effect increasing rural development investments, would decrease the burden on field agents working for the sole external actor intervening in these zones. Finally, policy- and decision-makers should reconsider resurrecting the Malagasy national volunteer service: an influx of dynamic, trained, young rural development volunteers into remote areas would surely help to alleviate the current shortage of human resources.

### Conclusion

The nuts and bolts or details of how one achieves rural development are critical but frequently overlooked. Field agents are one of the key pieces of the puzzle: one cannot achieve lasting and scaled-up results without a sustained field presence. However, the lack of trained and committed rural development field personnel is a major challenge. Technical and financial partners must be aware of this reality and take it into account in program and project design.